Ryan Padraig Kelly

Martina Niland has produced a substantial number of independent feature films and shorts since the late 1990’s. After an initial period volunteering on small film productions, the projects she now works on have offers of substantial budgets yet manage to maintain an authentic texture. In general the projects she elects to work on tend to be character driven, simple treatments fleshed out with honest and astute inflections. Likewise the stories are usually sourced from original scripts, written by a director, designed specifically for

the big screen. In interviews and in anecdotal stories told by people who have worked with her, her gift is that of calm faith and unwavering dedication. She has been described as sensible, passionate, ‘a joy to argue with’ and from a young age was an avid film fan.

After graduating with honours from the Dublin Institute of Technology with a degree in Communication, she spent the next few years working on small or no-budget productions for friends and writers and directors. Her break came when she worked with David Collins on *Short*, a 10-minute film

written and directed by Imogen Murphy. She began working alongside Collins for Irish independent production company Samson Films, which appears to have nurtured her talent and provided a base from which she has built her reputation. She worked with a writer/director called Karl Golden on two shorts, *Dogsbody* (2000) and *Beached* (2001) and with Tom Cosgrove (writer/director) on *All God's Children* (2002). Both of these early contacts she continued to work with as her career developed.

Still from The Most Fertile Man in Ireland

Martina Niland’s first feature length production was *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* (2000) which name-checked Irish film icons *The Commitments* (1991) and *Waking Ned* (1998) on some of its export marketing. James Nesbitt and Toyah Willcox star in the film with the lead played by Kris Marshall, who later went on to become a British household name due to his roles in the BBC’s prime-time sitcom *My Family* and adverts for BT. Despite not being a box-office smash, *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* did have a mainstream appeal, and as a first outing as associate producer on a feature

length film the experience was undoubtedly priceless. Just three years later she worked independently on the critically acclaimed feature length debut from Karl Golden, *The Honeymooners*. The transition from *The Most Fertile Man in Ireland* to *The Honeymooners* is notable for two reasons; it is an example of a developing fondness for character studies over action or spectacle, and demonstrates her knack for selecting projects, which are ahead of the curve. There is a pattern in her career of propagating fledgling writers/directors until they have developed their own reputation, in

a way perhaps similar to what David Collins did for her.

Perhaps the predominant reason I find her so interesting and inspiring is due to a combination of the following factors; she seems personable and loyal and is clearly interested in human dynamics as played out onscreen. She has also worked on non-filmic projects, for example, co-producing a Christmas special documentary for RTE, a television sitcom series, promotional videos for arts festivals and writing discursive literature about the Irish Film Industry.

In her interviews she comes across as warm and passionate, and very aware of the need for Irish film to be distinct from colonising influences. She regularly talks candidly about the state of the film industry in Ireland in comparison to industries abroad, proclaiming a pride in Irish ethics and an awareness of the nourishing environment institutions such as RTE provide.

It appears the role of a producer involves much more than I first thought, and that a good producer is arguably the best asset a film could have. The role requires an in-depth knowledge of the various

and convoluted ways of financing a film, a sound list of contacts, and the ability to work with writers sensitively whilst thoroughly interrogating the script pre-production. It involves knowing how to support and get the most out of directors, to be ruthless enough to guarantee each project you start is worthwhile, being able to ensure a project meets its expectations, and knowing how to best get the film into the market.

The Honeymooners was shot in 18 days on digital film and premiered at the London Film Festival in 2003. It is a romantic comedy grounded in clever dialogue, situated in a

rural environment with a small cast. Its success as a film arises from the uncluttered narrative, the characters are so developed yet slow to reveal themselves that it never feels contrived. Martina, Karl Golden and David Collins worked together again to make *Belonging to Laura*, a TV3 commission based on Oscar Wilde's 'Lady Windemere's Fan.' It was shot over 15 days and on a budget of 400,000 euro. It was adapted by theatre writers Iseult Golden and David Horan and was their screenwriting debut. What resulted is a modern vibrant 75 min film which features aspects of Irish

culture not often shown. In one scene an openly gay character attends a wedding where a polish band play and the guests eat Korean food. The characters are unconventional yet far from caricatured, and the film mixes satire with emotional intimacy in a way similar to *The Honeymooners*.

Still from Pavee Lackeen

Perry Ogden was known for his photographic work when he approached Martina Niland with an idea for a documentary style feature film about Irish travellers. His debut feature *Pavee Lackeen* (2005) went on to win numerous

awards including Best First Film at the London Film Festival and the IFTA for Best Film. It has a similar aesthetic and low-fi soundtrack style to that of *The Honeymooners* and indeed Martina's subsequent projects, its 'unmediated' texture aids a cleaner representation of the characters and it feels very real. It features the non-actor Maughan family in a mixture of improvised and scripted scenes which detail the conditions and circumstances related to the traveller community. It seems that Martina works on projects that have an inherent credibility, the films that result are startlingly honest and poignant,

and reflect an attitude of sensitivity towards an evolving culture. The use of non-actors and a photographer as director/cinematographer meant that many practice shoots were run, each costing the production financially. During shooting one of the cast was arrested and kept in custody – the production crew managed to get him released to complete the film. These kind of issues can arise when working with non-professional actors, especially if they are from a marginalised community, and the role of the producer is undoubtedly less

clearly defined when a small crew is involved.

While *Pavee Lackeen* was still in production, shooting for *Once* (2006) began. It had existed in the mind of the director for over two years, John Carney had wanted to make a modern musically themed film, with the narrative developing through songs and performances. His band member had played Outspan in *The Commitments*, and John from the beginning envisioned the film being made amongst friends. He contacted Samson Films, and what followed was “…a real back-to-basics form of filmmaking and certainly the kind

that has always attracted me the most.”[i] The compact crew and cast and quick shooting schedule resulted in a tension that is almost tangible. Characters seem to be communicating for each other rather than the cameras. *Once* won the Sundance film festival world cinema audience award amongst others, and was generally well received by critics.

Still from Once

Martina Niland’s career features projects, which represent an honest era in Irish filmmaking. It is clear that she has a preference for working on films, which stand

alone, without the gloss of box office big hitters or assured crew. I consider her role within Samson Films to have helped nurture these traits and her work to be invaluable to the Irish film industry industry. Samson Films seems like a family in the way staff members intermingle to realise films, which may not have been made otherwise. It is brave, especially when considering that for some production companies financial objectives govern decision making, that faith in a story and a good team is paramount to the way they operate. Martina Niland is undisputedly a vital part of this

contemporary Irish film network, and I think the role of a producer is often overlooked. The way she supports debut projects and unconventional takes on genres is to be applauded, the agitation of the film scene can surely only bring about healthy developments. I think that in years to come Samson Films will be recognised as what I see it as already, an important voice for independent productions and proof that faith and hard work can bring outstanding results. I am yet to see her latest productions, *Snap* (2010), *The Rafters* (2012) and *Grabbers* (2012), but I have faith that they will be worth

recommending to others as prime examples of independent cinema, as I have found with almost everything she has produced so far.